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Buddhist Commons in Asia

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While the international study of nonprofit organizations, voluntary action and philanthropy have been growing rapidly, there continue to be important exceptions to this trend. In particular, the international community of nonprofit, voluntary and philanthropic scholars has directed very little attention to developments in Asia. The reasons for this are many and varied. Not the least in importance are the cultural and language barriers which must be overcome in interpreting cultures which have their own interpretive and critical traditions, in some cases reaching back thousands of years.

Let us agree to begin by stipulating that nothing precisely like the modern nonprofit organization, voluntary association or foundation ever existed in Asia prior to the 20th century. Yet, there can be little doubt that some types of indigenous Asian activities analagous to nonprofit organization, voluntary action and philanthropy reach deep into the history of the many cultures of Asia. For example, local, democratic self-governing associations have been a traditional feature of Chinese village life (where the vast majority of the Chinese population still resides) for many centuries. (Leong and Tao, 1915; Smith, 1899) Similar associations are also part of the history of Japan. (Norbeck, 1972; Irokawa, 1973; Waters, 1983)

At least one scholar, (Irokawa, 1973) believes that such associations might have been the basis of a different, less centralized and less militaristic road to modernization for Japan. Hahm (1990) has examined a comparable development in 16th century Korea: Confucian "village codes" spelling out acceptable practices for "grass roots" participation in village governance and

mandating charitable practices. Many other comparable examples could be cited as well.

This article offers a preliminary interpretation of certain pre-modern, indigeneous Buddhist charitable and philanthropic institutions in Japan and Asia as distantly related to modern, western nonprofit, voluntary and philanthropic activity. Fundamental to that interpretation is the concept of the commons as developed in previous work by the author (Lohmann, 1989; Lohmann, 1992a; Lohmann, 1992b) The discussion is also based upon examination of a range of English-language sources on Buddhism in Asia.

Comparative analysis is still relatively undeveloped in nonprofit organization, voluntary action and philanthropy studies (although the creation of this journal will go a long way toward rectifying that). In general, such analyses can be expected to demonstrate historical connections between similar developments in different periods, and to point out independent occurrences of related phenomena. The purpose of this paper is to point out certain similarities between the institutions and practices of historic Buddhism in Asia and the modern, western nonprofit sector.

Religion is an important generator of nonprofit activity in the west. (James, 1989) Hence, it offers a plausible beginning point in the east as well. The selection of Buddhism, rather than other major Asian religions/philosophical systems (Islamic, Confucian, Tao, Hindu, Jain, Sik or any other) was purely arbitrary. Complicating this project are at least three major “gaps” in knowledge and understanding of nonprofit organizations, voluntary action and philanthropy which must be taken into account:

- 1) Historic and cultural gaps in understanding between Asia and the West. There is little doubt that western-style nonprofit (NPO) and nongovernmental (NGO) organizations have been developing throughout the

world in recent decades as part of what Salamon (1993) calls a “global associational revolution.” What remains largely unclear in the international context, however, is the contribution of unique local, traditional, indigeneous beliefs and practices to this trend. Examination of historical, anthropological, archeological, literary and other sources can be expected to reveal the existence of amazingly rich matrixes of pre-existing ideologies and institutions upon which “modern” NPO’s and NGO’s are being superimposed. This approach is likely to be particularly fruitful in those parts of Eastern Asia, where scholarly traditions emphasizing historical records reach back many hundreds of years. (see, for example, Li, 1989)

2) Gaps between ancient and modern beliefs and practices. Modern Asia, and particularly the nations of the Pacific Rim, have been influenced by modern industrialism and urbanism fully as much as the nations in the West (albeit on a significantly different timetable). With the topic under examination, there appear to be particularly wide gaps between “ancient” Buddhist practices and “modern” ones, although the cusp between old and new is likely to vary widely by region and nation. In India, for example, Hindu resurgence and Moslem invasions effectively sealed the end of “civilizational Buddhism” there and led to the effective disappearance of the Buddhist community in the 13th century. (Reynolds and Hallisey, 1987, 343) “Modern” Buddhism there might be dated from that point.

“Modern” Buddhism however, must be dated from different times in different parts of Asia. In Japan, the 19th century Meiji Restoration is critical: Buddhist monastic and temple-based philanthropic organizations were taken over by the imperial government as part of the overall seizure of all the Buddhist temples in Japan, and not returned for many years. Alternatively, post-war American occupation, which banned public worship of the emperor (and

Japanese absolutism), also stands out as a particularly important watershed in the history of Japanese commons.

3) The idealism gap which arises in analysis of any religion, ideology or belief structure between expressions and practices. English-language analyses of Buddhism were long limited to theological, cosmological and philosophical points of view. Only in recent decades have attention to actual behavior, attitudes and institutions become important topics.

While concepts like NPO and NGO may be suitable for analysis of contemporary developments, it seems highly unlikely that they can be simply or easily applied to earlier indigenous developments without serious risk of distortion. The concept of the commons, is derived in part from the study of ancient history in the west, and has already been shown to be useful as an historical-comparative measure for interpreting developments of charity, philanthropy and nonprofit and voluntary organization in ancient and medieval Judeo-Christian tradition and western civilization. (Lohmann, 1992, pp.) The question remains whether it can also be usefully employed in cross-cultural contexts where the gaps are as large as those evident in the case of Buddhism.

As an ideal-type, a commons can be defined by five principal characteristics: 1) Participation in a commons is free and uncoerced. 2) Participants share common or agreed upon purposes. 3) Participants also share resources in common (Such as a fund of jointly held money; collections of precious objects or repertoires of ritual actions whose meanings are shared and valued by the participants.) 4) Participation involves and enacts a sense of mutuality. 5) Social relations among participants are characterized by implicit or explicit standards of fairness.

One of the principal stumbling blocks to the recognition of commons in Asian and other non-western cultures has been the tendency to associate

“voluntary” behavior only with a narrow range of associational behavior characteristic of the modern, western democratic tradition. Thus, Norbeck (1972, 38) for example, concluded that “common interest associations are very ancient in Japan” but added that Japanese associations “were never associated with a democratic form of local or national government until very recent times”. (Norbeck, 1972, 40) It is obvious in the context of the article and the tone of Norbeck’s discussion, both that he saw important connections between Japanese “common interest associations” and western voluntary associations, and that the two types did not appear to be identical, especially regarding the “voluntary” nature of participation and involvement.

It is unclear from the context, however, whether Norbeck was referring to traditional village associations of the type analyzed by Irokawa (1973), single-purpose groups like the association Takekoshi (1930) credits with enabling publication of his book, political reform groups like the Risshisha (Self Reliance Association, c. 1874) or Kokkai kisei domeidai (Association for the Establishment of a National Assembly, c. 1880) (Waters, 1983) or something else entirely. The sheer range of such possibilities is in itself evidence for the existence of some type of related associational activity, not only in Japan but throughout East Asia. However, the exact nature of such phenomena remains puzzling.

It was a beginning assumption of this effort that the concept of the commons might offer a bridge between western nonprofit organization, voluntary action and philanthropy and the kind of Asian phenomena to which Norbeck and others have alluded. The problem is compounded by the tendency of Asian scholars to address ideas, beliefs and norms, with very little explicit attention to organizational or other practical matters. As a result, any fuller understandings of Asian “third sectors” has to be teased gradually from a

combination of literature review and field study. A logical beginning point for such an effort is the thesis that Buddhism and other Pan-Asian religions may have played a role comparable to Christianity and Judaism in the West in nurturing the development of at least some Asian commons.

To the extent that the commons proves useful in the examination of an Asian religion like Buddhism, it offers a more general framework for comparative studies of nonprofit, voluntary and philanthropic studies. In attempting to fit the model of the commons to Buddhism, this article examines: a complex of Buddhist religious beliefs supporting gift exchange associated with the concepts of dharma and dana ; selected major Buddhist philanthropists such as a northern Indian king Asoka and an 8th century Japanese Prince Shotoku; a distinctive Buddhist model of “community organization” (sangha); a long tradition of international Buddhist convocations in which key beliefs of the Buddhist community were agreed to; and a distinctive, Japanese Buddhist model of organized fund-raising (kanjin) campaigns dating from the 8th century C.E.

Taken together, it is suggested, these characteristics point to the existence of a traditional Buddhist model of a commons which shares some, but certainly not all, of the characteristics of the western models of the nonprofit organization and voluntary association. This commons is, like its western counterparts, also susceptible to enormous local, regional and other variations. (Gombrich, 1971; Von Der Mehden, 1986) Compounding this analysis is the fact that Buddhism is highly pluralistic and subject to enormous local and national variety of beliefs and practices. Consequently, in a brief article of this sort, it is only possible to hint at the enormous variety of related activity one should expect to find in the Buddhist commons.

To western eyes, Buddhism may appear to be a highly unified religious tradition, yet the name actually signifies a highly diverse and long-standing

religious movement reaching across 25 centuries and many different cultures and localities of Asia. “The concept of Buddhism was created about three centuries ago to identify what we now know to be a pan-Asian religious tradition that dates back some twenty-five hundred years.” (Reynolds and Hallisey, 1987, 335) Although the term has gained acceptance, there is still no real consensus about its meaning.

The sheer diversity of perspectives on Buddhism is itself a stumbling block to understanding. According to Reynolds and Hallisey, scholars tend to divide the topic by chronology, country, or school of thought. In addition, Buddhism has been variously labeled an accumulated tradition, a religion, a philosophy, a civilization or a culture, and yet none of these is fully satisfactory.

It is conventional, also, to divide Buddhism into two “great schools”, usually labeled Mahayana and Hinayana. The former is associated with the northeastern Asian region and is characterized by eclecticism and a general belief in a common search for salvation. The latter (and earlier) of the two great schools, prevalent throughout Southeast Asia, emphasizes personal salvation through individual efforts.

In addition to the two “great schools”, there are many distinct contemporary and historic Buddhist sects: learned and popular scriptural Buddhism, Zen, Pure Land, Tantra to name just a few. Further, Buddhist sectarianism, like Christianity in the West is not strictly an historical phenomenon. Taylor (1990) sees an emerging form of “Buddhist protestantism” in two movements associated with the emerging middle class in contemporary Thailand. Satha-Anand (1990) identifies three other reform movements within the same country.

For our purposes, we need only recognize “Buddhism” as the English-language name of the entire Pan-Asian religious tradition associated with the

teachings of Buddha. As such, the Buddhist religious tradition meets at least an elemental definition of a commons as a community of adherents sharing a vocabulary of beliefs and concepts and a world view/paradigm.

Buddhism began on the Indian subcontinent in the 4th or 5th century BCE as a small religious community that “developed a certain distance, both self-perceived and real, from other contemporary religious communities” of the time. (Reynolds and Hallisey, 1987, 336) Thus, from the earliest date, there are signs of an emerging Buddhist commons in the sense among its members of a distinctive Buddhist community.

Was that community characterized by open participation, shared purposes, pooled resources, mutuality and fairness?

The first step to answering that question involves consideration of the membership issue in light of certain key Buddhist doctrines and beliefs.

In terms of morality, the Buddhist concept of karma is said to guide one's life and actions. Karma directly involves an action and its result. According to at least one interpreter, Buddha preached the benefits of karmic actions partly to state a moral truth, and partly to attract people to spiritual life by tempting them through rewards for virtuous actions. Thus, the Buddha utilized the phrase “charity is a ladder to heaven” to emphasize the effects of karma on the cycle of life and enlightenment. (Dharmasiri, 1989, 27)

The centrality of a concept like karma in Buddhist thought implies a connection between thought and action, and degrees of volition and choice in behavior which are closely associated with the meaning of “voluntary” action at a very fundamental level. Active choice is implied by the concept of karma, and by the Path of Right Action, discussed below. Even though a great deal of work would be necessary to detail the exact meaning of voluntary action in Buddhist

thought, the concepts of karma and right action undeniably imply at least a degree of voluntarism and choice in Buddhist thought.

Thus, the first condition of a commons --voluntarism--is present in Buddhist thought (and presumably in Buddhist action as well). However, this condition also contains a huge caveat that Buddhist “voluntarism” may be related to western democratic notions of voluntarism, but is in no way identical with them.

From the very start, Buddhism embraced a structure of goals and objectives and distinctive, even unique, models of community within which to interpret them. As a religion and philosophy of life, Buddhism embraces a distinct model of what a worthy human being should be, and sets forth ideals of wisdom, morality and charity. The highest religious goal of Buddhism may be said to be enlightenment (satori) or insight into life and the world.

Achievement of full enlightenment is the condition usually translated as nirvana. In some traditions, most notably the Pure Land tradition, achieving nirvana is associated with a place -- the Pure Land (at least loosely analagous with the Christian concept of heaven)

Achievement of nirvana -- which involves cessation of the cycle of life (samsara) is restricted to monks of the Sangha . Lesser goals, to which the vast majority of the laity might aspire include rebirth into a higher position or status. (Pryor, 1990) To be a good lay Buddhist is to be ethical and follow the Eightfold Path. Samsara (suffering and desire) can be eliminated by adhering to the Eightfold Path which consists of right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration.

By following the Eightfold Path, in which right action includes the practice of charity, the Buddhist increases his chances of attaining higher spiritual morality, as expressed in the Ten Perfections. Three of the Perfections are

particularly relevant to a concern for charity: generosity (dana), morality (sila), and loving kindness. (Saddhisatta, 72) The Path of Right Action directly relates to the western concept of charity and concern for the welfare of others. It involves abiding by the Five Precepts and specifically “not to take what is not given, but to practice charity and generosity (dana).” (Saddhatissa, 71) In Buddhist thought, dana (generosity) is the ultimate ethical action which gradually leads toward the state of nirvana (a term and concept borrowed from Hindu thought).

In contemporary Japanese Buddhist thought, mercy (maitracittata) is the basic concept of Japanese Buddhist charity, according to Hayashi. It has two roots: The word maitreya means true brotherly love or pure parental love and kurana means affection or kindness. (Hayashi , 119)

The related concepts of dana (generosity), karma (action and result), sila (morality), samsara (the cycle of life), nirvana (the state of perfect enlightenment or sansori) are integral to the larger complex of Buddhist thought. They also set forth a major conceptual framework within Buddhist thought for identifying, analyzing and critiquing the common purposes of joint action. Interestingly, however, the structure of common purposes inherent in Buddhist thought was never actualized by the Buddhist community into institutions specializing in charity and philanthropy like those in the west. It should be clear from the above that this is not because of the absense of concepts for legitimating such institutions. The answer must lie elsewhere.

In the theory of the commons, the resources of common action are characterized as three-fold: treasuries of money, collections of precious objects and repertories of prized or valued behavior. (Lohmann, 1992) All three of these types of common resources are found in abundance in the Buddhist tradition.

Buddhist temples and monasteries can be found, in abundance, throughout Asia. Satha-Amand (1990) cites estimates by a government official, for example, that there are 30,000 temples in Thailand. In the city of Kyoto Japan there are said to be nearly a thousand temples. Generally speaking, these temples and monasteries are supported through systems of gift-giving and donations of participants and patrons. These distinct Buddhist eleemosynary practices are supported, rationalized and explained with reference to the concepts of the common purposes of Buddhism discussed above.

Thus, in a medieval Vietnamese text it was said of a monk named Tri Bao: "He never acted for his own profit or to gain support... He used all that he received to repair temples, build stupas and cast great bells in order to safeguard the Dharma for prosperity."

The treasures of Buddhist monasteries can become very substantial indeed. One Thai official estimated that their combined assets exceed 6 billion Baht (\$240 million US) The most elaborate temple complex in Bangkok (Dhammakaya Temple) is alone said to have assets of 800 million Baht (\$32 million US). (Satha-Anand, 1990) Other types of collections can also be identified. In Taegu, Korea, for example, is a collection of printing blocks over 800 years old for printing the Buddhist canon. Cahill (1989) cites Buddhist monasteries as

Likewise, the entire Buddhist repertory of ritual, ceremonies, festivals and observances must be counted among its shared resources as well.

The central organizational concept of Buddhism is that of the Sangha, or religious community of member-participants who live together, share mutual support and a joint ritual life and have evolved their own norms of mutuality and fairness. Both by example and by doctrine, early Buddhism aspired for an ideal Buddhist society in which the Sangha was counter-balanced by an

organized laity. (Bunnag, 1973; Chekvararti, 1987; Ikeda, 1977) This dichotomy of Buddhism was also cross-cut by the emergence of an imperial courtly elite on the one hand and an ordinary Sangha and laity on the other. These four distinct classes of participants defined the Buddhist community for more than a thousand years. (Reynolds and Hallisey, 1987, 339)

There appear to be major similarities between the common-interest association of the Sangha and early Christian monasticism of the syncretic type. (see Lawrence, 1989) These parallels are reflected, for example, in the conventional English language reference to members of the Buddhist Sangha as “Buddhist monks” (followed here).

As the Sangha shifted from a wandering institution of itinerant monks to a system of established residences or monasteries, the daily needs of the sangha resulted in the establishment of permanent ties between the sangha and the laity based in Buddhist ethics. Indeed, Spiro (1970) argues that without dana (gifts, or giving) there probably would not have been any sangha. Especially in the beginning, the sangha was completely dependent upon donations of food and money by the laity and other material dana (amisadana) for their survival. Yet he argues, the Buddhist concept of dana comprises not only material offerings, but also gifts of Dharma, in the form of teaching and preaching. The original relationship was thus a reciprocal one of mutual exchange: the basic gift of alms in exchange for the teachings of the dharma. In India, where Buddhism originated, such exchanges were consistent with an ancient and honorable tradition of household gifts supporting religious mendicants and holy men.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Buddhist charitable practice (by comparison with Judeo-Christian charity) is the ethically subordinate position which alms and acts of charity to the poor and needy assume relative to donations to the Sangha. In the Buddhist hierarchy of giving, gifts to the

Sangha clearly bring the greatest merit; Supporting a monk or building a pagoda, for example. To contribute to a poverty-stricken widow, or to build a school is meritorious, of course, but inferior (or less meritorious)dana.

Although there may be other variations between Burmese and Japanese Buddhism, this priority order applies in the case of Japanese Buddhism also.

One should be careful not to interpret the process of accumulating merit, from the Buddhist point of view as analagous to western expressions of self-interest in any way. In the Buddhist view, because all life is one, it is inevitable that good works, and the merit that comes from them, must be shared.

(Humphreys, 1977, 78)

Throughout many parts of contemporary southeast Asia, (and on many western city streets beginning in the 1960's) the sight of a procession of monks with their "begging bowls" or "collection plates" is still a familiar and thoroughly understood one. Whether the impressive treasuries, collections and repertoires of the Buddhist tradition were all accumulated over the centuries in this rather elementary manner, or accompanied by other fund-raising and patronage practices is a question fundamental to further understanding of the Buddhist commons. Certainly, it seems highly unlikely that processions of monks applied this approach at the imperial courts of Mongol, Chinese, or other Asian emperors.

In eighth century Japan, they appears to have been an unprecedented innovation of Buddhist fund-raising practice. The reciprocal supportive relation between the Sangha and laity took a very distinct form known as kanjin campaigns, which were organized public solicitations or fund-raising campaigns for donations to Buddhist monasteries which played an important part in the spread of medieval Buddhism in that country. (Goodwin, 827) In the Heian period (794-1185) kanjin came to signify efforts by temples to solicit the public

for contributions. Earlier kanjin efforts can be traced to the eighth century, when the monk Gyoki was asked by the Shomu emperor to solicit materials for the casting of the Great Buddha image at Tojajji temple in Nara. In the Nara period, Gyogi went on to combine his missionary work with social service and founded many orphanages, dispensaries and homes for the aged.

In what amounts to a major indigenous form of Japanese fund-raising, donations were collected in this way for a variety of projects, such as repairing temple buildings, making images, or copying sutras. In the kanjin, people were asked to give according to their ability, whether it be a large donation or a minute one, and all who gave were promised that they would attain sufficient merit to achieve enlightenment. In Nara, monks were especially fervent in this endeavor and argued that anyone could perform a small act of virtue and receive great rewards for it. As one such virtuous act, a lay believer might donate a pittance to a temple. Such arguments formed the practical basis of the kanjin campaigns.

Kanjin did not become a major phenomenon, however, until several centuries later. In the twelfth century, lay followers had been taught that they would acquire merit if they gave alms to monks or land to monasteries. At that time, hijiri, the soliciting agents of the kanjin campaigns, were organized into formal groups in the 11th and 12th centuries and chartered by the great Buddhist temples for the purpose of fund raising. Hijiri thus became a permanent feature of medieval Japanese Buddhism as well as a major factor in the spread of Buddhism to the Japanese masses. The hijiri traveled throughout the country preaching and receiving contributions. Given the reciprocal doctrine of dana outlined above, it is plausible to assume that the hijiri did not merely collect donations after the manner of tax collectors, but also preached and taught (dharma). Their mission was also, in part, to follow the example set by Gyoki

who was said to have built roads and bridges, and dug wells in the villages where he preached (amisadana).

English-language references to kanjin campaigns are extremely rare. The parallel between such campaigns and historic and contemporary western fund-raising, however, is unmistakable. A related question which cannot currently be answered is whether such campaigns were limited to Japanese Buddhism, or whether similar organized solicitation efforts beyond the level of the "begging bowl parades" can be identified.

Whatever their fund-raising methods, there is documentary and monumental evidence of distinct Buddhist institutions of philanthropy and patronage. Buddhist philanthropists and major patrons are credited in the historical records with enormous outpourings of gifts, support and protection, for the construction of stupas, hospitals, hostels, support of scholars and painters, building of highways and bridges and a great variety of additional meritorious deeds.

It was said of Tri Bao, a medieval Vietnamese Buddhist monk: "He never acted for his own profit or to gain support... He used all that he received to repair temples, build stupas and cast great bells in order to safeguard the Dharma for posterity." (Cleary, 1991) The same source speaks with great approval of Quang Tri, an aristocratic monk. Donors from all over offered him gifts that just piled up unused while he sought enlightenment.

One of the great figures of the Buddhist philanthropic and charitable tradition, who deserves to be recognized as one of the greatest philanthropists in world history is King Asoka, who lived in the third century B.C. in northern India. His life and deeds are celebrated in avadanas (legends) (Strong, 1983) In his devotion to the Dharma, Asoka is said to have devoted his life to four perfections: donation, morality, patience and vigor. (Robinson and Johnson, 46)

Asoka is closely associated with a tradition of Buddhist kingship which created and sustained an imperial Buddhism which is “truly civilizational in character.” (Reynolds and Hallisey, 1987, 339) Both by example and by doctrine, Askooan Buddhism aspires for an ordered Buddhist civilization in which the Sangha is counter-balanced by an organized laity. This is cross-cut by an imperial-civilizational elite on the one hand and an ordinary Sangha and laity on the other. (Reynolds and Hallisey, 1987, 339)

In pursuit of his dream of a model Buddhist society, King Asoka is said to have built hospitals, hostels, and set up an organized system of giving donations to the needy. Asoka also instructed the governors of his empire to promote the dharma of the followers of all religions, and to promote welfare and happiness among both servants and masters, as well as the protectorless and the aged. (Organ, 250) Such teachings have a revolutionary potential similar to that of Christian charity in the west.

Similarly philanthropy on a national scale is associated with the introduction of Buddhism into Japan in the sixth century. Buddhism was officially introduced into Japan in 552. Up until this time, Japanese native religions (collectively, Shinto) had been fundamentally animistic and shamanistic. In 593, a devout Buddhist scholar, Shotoku Taishi, assumed control of the government as prince-regent and established Buddhism as the official state religion of Japan. Like Asoka, he is also credited as the initiator of important philanthropic works, particularly temple building in the Kyoto-Nara district.

Prince Shotoku laid the foundation of a grand and distinctly Japanese Buddhist philanthropic establishment, which was in all likelihood supported by both royal and aristocratic patronage and consisted of four principal components: a temple together with an asylum, hospital and dispensary. Including the latter three charitable institutions within a Buddhist temple

complex appears to have been a significant innovation of the Shotoku reign. The resulting establishment (Tenno-ji) was a unique cluster of related religious, educational, and philanthropic organizations. (Anesaki, 58)

Such tenno-ji mirror the comparable development of hospices, schools and hospitals within the medieval Western monastic and cathedral organizations in Europe in roughly the same time frame. Thus, in a world philanthropic perspective, the Buddhist philanthropic patronage of King Asoka and Prince Shotoku might be comparable respectively to the Roman Emperor Constantine and the later Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne. The kanjin campaigns and the philanthropic establishments initiated by Prince Shotoku created the basis for what would eventually be an indigeneous Japanese Buddhist system of temples with associated educational, medical, philanthropic and humanitarian institutions. (Pratt, 1928, 468)

One of the other institutions which point toward the existence of a Buddhist commons is the on-going, periodic convening of Buddhist convocations or counciliar assemblies. The importance of counciliar assemblies in the Buddhist tradition can be gauged by the fact that the Encyclopedia of Religion contains only two entries on religion-wide "Councils" --one for Christianity and the other for Buddhism. Buddhist councils compare, in many respects, to Vatican councils, synods, conventions, and the numerous other convocations of Christianity. Regardless of methods of selection, representation and the like, such convocations aspire to be organized meetings for purposes of discussion and dialogue of representatives of the entire religious community.

The first such Buddhist council was purportedly held during the rainy season immediately following the Buddha's death (circa 483 BC). (Gomez, 1987, 359-360; Prebish, 1978; 1987, 120) "The general consensus of scholarship devoted

to the first council almost uniformly concludes that the canonical accounts are at best greatly exaggerated and at worst pure fiction.” (Prebish, 1987, 121)

Whether historical or mythic, the first Buddhist council is credited with 3 major functions of this council: 1) Establishing authority for the community in the absence of its leader; 2) Meting out formal penalties to assure that communal purity could be retained; 3) and the mythic function of assuring an “auspicious beginning for the religious organization’s new mission.” (Prebish, 1987, 121)

In any event, an actual meeting, usually titled the Second Buddhist Council was held in the city of Vaisali in the 4th century BCE. By that date, the Buddhist community already included two competing assemblies, corresponding to the modern distinction of elitist, monastic traditions of “original” or “true” Buddhism and a more democratic populist tradition. Shortly after the council a split occurred between those who adhered to the former position (Theravadins, or proponents of the way of the Elders in Sanscrit) and Mahasanghikas (members of the Great Assembly) who adhered to the latter position. (Reynolds and Hallisey, 1987, 338) The Encyclopedia of Religion also lists seven other Buddhist councils, the latest held in Rangoon in 1954. (Prebish, 124)

This article examines: a complex of Buddhist religious beliefs supporting gift exchange associated with the concepts of dharma and dana ; selected major Buddhist philanthropists such as a northern Indian king Asoka and an 8th century Japanese Prince Shotoku; a distinctive Buddhist model of “community organization” (sangha); a long tradition of international Buddhist convocations in which key beliefs of the Buddhist community were agreed to; and a distinctive, Japanese Buddhist model of organized fund-raising (kanjin) campaigns dating from the 8th century C.E. Taken together, it is suggested, these characteristics point to the existence of a traditional Buddhist model of a

commons which shares some, but certainly not all, of the characteristics of the western models of the nonprofit organization and voluntary association.

However, “the Buddhist religion” is also highly pluralistic and subject to enormous local and national variety of beliefs and practices. In a brief article of this sort, it is only possible to hint at the enormous variety of related activity found in the Buddhist commons. However, such diversity also points to a kind of Asian pluralism which may offer a broader key to understanding the historic role of commons in Asia.

Finally, it seems plausible that the outline of aspects of a Buddhist commons offered here points to the likelihood of other important “non-profit sector-like” organizations and institutions in connection with other Asian religions. Overall, the subject of the Asian commons is one which requires considerable additional investigation by those interested in a fuller historical and cross-cultural picture of the place of nonprofit organizations, voluntary action and philanthropy in human affairs.

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